

# Exposing pre-service teachers (PSTs) to IEPWriter to help learn the most challenging aspects of being a special education teacher

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## **Abstract**

A three-week IEPWriter project was added to an undergraduate special education course offered at a mid-sized public university in Southeastern Pennsylvania to help Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) learn how to manage and write Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The PSTs completed a 10-item survey regarding their experience using IEPWriter to complete various special education paperwork tasks. Out of the 25 PSTs who participated, most (76%) had no previous experience, and all found the experience to help better prepare them for the paperwork responsibilities of being a future special education teacher.

## **About the Author**

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## Introduction:

Many teacher preparation programs lack required coursework regarding special education law including how to write legally compliant Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (Markelz et al., 2022), despite writing IEPs being one of the top responsibilities for special education teachers and one of the most challenging aspects of the job causing burnout among K-12 special education teachers (Brunsting, 2014; Hagaman & Casey, 2018), even more significant for novice teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Additionally, this creates a frequent turnover for open special education positions, causing school districts nationwide difficulty finding qualified candidates due to a rampant teacher shortage (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Reviewing how Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) are prepared to write IEPs during their undergraduate experience is one factor that can help future special education teachers properly manage the paperwork requirements for a caseload of students once employed. The IEP is the most important document for a student, as it outlines all of their required special education services and supports, and is federally mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Blasko and colleagues (2024) surveyed 218 special education teachers in Pennsylvania regarding their training in learning how to write an IEP, with 63% of the respondents feeling unprepared to write IEPs as certified special education teachers, and only 39% of participants learning how to write an IEP from start to finish. Insufficient IEPs can lead to due process hearings for school districts and families, and of most concern, cause a lack of academic or functional progress for a student. These findings show a need for teacher preparation programs to increase the training provided on IEP development and implementation for PSTs.

Werts and colleagues (2002) successfully implemented experiential learning experiences for PSTs associated with IEP development, such as using case study students and interviews with school administrators and parents. Additionally, scholars have supported PSTs in understanding the IEP implementation by engaging in in-person (Toledo, 2023) and virtual (Mason, 2023) mock IEP meetings. However, these studies in-

volve PSTs creating and using hard copies of the IEP through a Word document. School districts have been using online special education data management systems for decades, such as IEPWriter, for special education teachers to complete the necessary paperwork and help ensure federal compliance (Serfass & Peterson, 2007). Jenkins (1986) examined the impact using IEPWriter had on 42 special education teachers in Hawaii to find it saved approximately 30 minutes on each IEP, and the quality of the IEPs, in meeting legal requirements, was significantly greater. Yet, no studies to date explore how exposing PSTs to these platforms can help enhance their learning of the IEP and help them gain proficiency with this essential job requirement.

Serfass and Peterson (2007) identify 19 commonly used online special education data management systems across the nation, including IEPWriter developed by Leader Services in 1968. IEPWriter states it is the most “prominent” IEP system in Pennsylvania, with 571 schools currently using it to write IEPs (IEPWriter, 2025). This study implemented a three-week IEPWriter project with 25 undergraduate PSTs enrolled at a university in Southeastern Pennsylvania to determine any potential benefits it could have in helping PSTs connect special education law with IEP development, including writing an entire IEP, revising an IEP, managing IEP due dates, reporting IEP progress monitoring, and documenting IEP team member communication using the IEPWriter platform. This study seeks to fill the current gap in the literature by identifying how using an online special education management platform, such as IEPWriter, within a teacher preparation program could improve how PSTs learn to write IEPs. A greater understanding of how to write an IEP and navigate a commonly used platform in K-12 schools can help increase IEP accuracy and decrease the stress or time novice special education teachers report spending on this essential job duty (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

## Methodology

The researcher and professor of this study engaged in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by inquiring about the impact of a specific teaching practice, the use of IEP Writer in this study, as a formal means to improve students’ learning, contribute

**Table 1**

*Questionnaire Items*

1.	Before taking this course, have you heard of IEPWriter or any similar online special education management software?
2.	Have you seen a special education teacher use IEPWriter or any similar online special education management software in your field courses or work experiences?
3.	How easy did you find IEPWriter to use and navigate?
4.	Do you prefer using IEPWriter to create special education documents or the Word template for these documents?
5.	Were the assignments in IEPWriter (e.g., IEP revision, progress monitoring, parent communication log) helpful in understanding how the policies we have reviewed in this course are implemented in the K-12 school setting?
6.	Did working in IEPWriter help you feel better prepared for managing a caseload of student's paperwork?
7.	How much time would you have liked to allocate this semester in this course to working in IEPWriter?
8.	Which case manager task did you find the most difficult to complete in IEPWriter?
9.	Which case manager task did you find the easiest to complete in IEPWriter?
10.	Do you have any additional thoughts or comments regarding your experience using IEPWriter this semester?

to effective teaching practices in higher education, and as a reflexive practice (Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012). The SoTL project used a survey research design approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researcher's place of employment, a mid-sized public university in Southeastern Pennsylvania, to collect and analyze survey data regarding PSTs' experience using IEPWriter. The questionnaire included 10 items, with most providing multiple-choice responses except for the last item, which was open-ended (Table 1).

**IEPWriter Project**

The IEPWriter project was added to a required undergraduate assessment course that reviews paperwork requirements for future special education teachers. All PSTs in the course are double majors, pursuing their certification in Special Education PreK-12th grade and Early Grades Preparation PreK-4th grade or Middle Grades Preparation 4th-8th grade in Pennsylvania. The course met twice a week, in person, for an hour and fifteen-minute class sessions over 15 consecutive weeks during the Fall 2024 semester.

The course typically includes learning about special education law and policy in terms of the evaluation process and special education documents, then students create the documents (e.g., Reevaluation Report, Individualized Education Program, Invitation to Participate, and Notice of Recommended Educational Placement) using Word templates available through the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN, 2025). However, students only completed these documents for one hypothetical case study student. In the K-12th grade setting, special education teachers are responsible for completing these documents for a whole caseload of students and typically use online software, such as IEPWriter, versus Word templates. The IEPWriter project was added to the last three weeks of the course to have PSTs apply their learning by practicing the skills they've learned using online software, that there is a high likelihood they will use once certified, and to get a sense of what it is like to do these skills for a caseload of students.

Each PST was given their username and password to log in to their IEPWriter account. The project consist-

ed of five parts using IEPWriter, including 1) creating a spreadsheet for paperwork due dates, 2) creating an IEP, 3) completing an IEP revision, 4) creating a progress report for academic and functional IEP goals, and 5) creating a parent call log to document communication. All PSTs were given a hypothetical caseload of 12 students receiving learning support services.

## Participants

During the last week of the semester, and the conclusion of the IEPWriter project, PSTs were asked for their participation in the study. PSTs were asked to anonymously complete a 10-item questionnaire (Table 1) using Qualtrics. The PSTs were reminded that their participation was optional and would not have an impact on their performance in the course. All PSTs in the course (n=25) provided their consent and completed the questionnaire. All the PSTs (n=25) identified as female. Due to prerequisite requirements, 84% (n=21) of the PSTs were juniors, and 16% (n=4) were seniors. Most of the PSTs (92%, n=23) were Early Grades PreK-4th grade double majors, and a few (8%, n=2) were Middle Grades 4-8th grade double majors.

Items 1-9 of the questionnaire, written in multiple-choice format, were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The last item, written in an open-ended format, was analyzed using deductive coding based on the study's research question: *Do Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) feel better prepared to complete the paperwork requirements as special education case managers after using IEPWriter?*

## Results

All 25 PSTs completed items 1-9 of the questionnaire, with only three PSTs completing item 10, providing some additional feedback regarding their experience using IEPWriter. Most of the PSTs (75%, n=19) had never heard of IEPWriter or a different online special education management software before taking this course; however, most students (75%, n=19) have seen a special education teacher in their field or work experiences completing special education paperwork using an online platform. Only one PST responded with previous experience not only hearing of IEPWriter or a different online special education management software, but also some experience using the system.

When first introduced to IEPWriter in class, several students inquired about the requirement to create Word documents if they could have used an online platform instead. The instructor shared the importance of PSTs understanding the different sections of the IEP before using an online system to know what information goes where. Additionally, some schools in Pennsylvania may use a different system other than IEPWriter. Interestingly, after the IEPWriter project, 92% (n=23) of the PSTs preferred creating all special education documents using Word templates over IEPWriter. This could be due to most PSTs (68%, n=17) finding IEPWriter somewhat difficult to use and navigate. Students had trouble with the platform properly saving, causing some students to redo a section of a document. Some students had difficulty transferring information from the format of the Word templates to IEPWriter, even though they both requested the same information but visually displayed it differently. A student commented, "IEPWriter is clunky," a term commonly used to describe something that can be awkward to use or seem outdated. One PST identified IEPWriter to be extremely difficult to use, and seven PSTs (28%) thought it was somewhat easy to use.

Despite using IEPWriter being a learning curve for the PSTs, all participants found using IEPWriter helpful in replicating what case managers are required to complete in K-12 settings, with almost half of the PSTs (n=12) finding the experience extremely helpful and the remaining PSTs (n=13) finding it somewhat helpful. Additionally, the PSTs all felt completing the special education paperwork in IEPWriter helped them feel better prepared for doing it in their career; with 16% (n=4) fully prepared, 56% (n=14) mostly prepared, and 28% (n=7) somewhat prepared. All three PSTs who responded to item 10 identified that even though IEPWriter was "frustrating," "difficult," and "not very user-friendly" at times, they felt exposure to the system benefited them in learning the paperwork requirements of caseload management and feeling better prepared for their future career in special education. Furthermore, one PST noted how even problem-solving technical difficulties is part of the job, "It was frustrating at times because it is not the most user-friendly, but those struggles would also happen if you had to use IEPwriter in your district."

The PSTs completed various case manager tasks in IEPWriter connected to IEP implementation and management for three weeks out of a 15-week semester. Most of the PSTs (64%, n=16) felt this was the perfect amount of time to gain experience using an online special education management software. A third of the PSTs (n=8) would have preferred a little more time, and one PST would have preferred a lot more time working in IEPWriter. One PST noted in item 10, “just taking an extra day to explore IEP writer.” Most PSTs (68%, n=17) found creating a student’s IEP in IEPWriter to be the most difficult paperwork requirement to complete, followed by creating a progress report (28%, n=7). Most PSTs (80%, n=20) found documenting parent communication using the parent call log in IEPWriter to be the easiest function to use, followed by creating a Notice of Recommended Educational Placement.

### **Discussion**

PSTs need exposure to as many job-related challenges in special education as possible to support them in being better equipped to handle those challenges once certified and increase retention rates. Current research shows how the paperwork requirements for special education teachers are one of the most challenging aspects of the job (Brunsting, 2014; Hagaman & Casey, 2018), and many feel their undergraduate training did not prepare them for it (Blasko et al., 2024; Mehrenberg, 2013). The 25 PSTs who participated in this study identified how having some training and experience using IEPWriter, an online special education management system, helped them better understand how special education law translates to completing special education documents (52% somewhat helpful, 48% extremely helpful) and feeling better prepared to manage a caseload of students' paperwork (28% somewhat prepared, 56% mostly prepared, and 16% fully prepared).

Most of the PSTs (76%, n=19), juniors and seniors, identified not having any previous direct exposure to an online special education data management system in their field or coursework despite it being a job requirement. For the PSTs who have seen a special education teacher using one (76%, n=19), the experience of observing a mentor using the platform is extremely different than experiencing it for themselves. This observing versus hands-on learning using an online sys-

tem is common for student teaching as well since PSTs do not have direct access to their mentor teacher's online account since they are a guest, soon-to-be certified, teacher in the school, and for confidentiality purposes. The PSTs in this study could log in to their own IEPWriter account and use the functions just as they would once they had become certified and employed special education teachers.

The majority of the PSTs (72%, n=18) shared that IEPWriter was difficult to use, but they overcame the technical challenges and were glad they had the experience using it. One PST specifically noted how overcoming technical challenges using an online special education data management system is another challenge they'd have to experience on the job that they got to experience in their undergraduate preparation with support.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note that the findings of this study are from a small sample size (n=25) of female PSTs, using one (IEPWriter) of the various online special education data management systems available. The special education assessment course at the university where this study was conducted typically only has one-course section per semester for double majors, limiting the number of participants. It would be beneficial for future studies to continue to explore the potential benefits of teaching PSTs how to use a special education management software, such as IEPWriter, and to compare using a larger sample of students either at one college or university or at different institutions for increased generalizability. Additionally, this study yielded positive results; however, there are no previous studies that explore the implementation of using any online special education management platforms with PSTs to compare findings.

### **Implications for Future Educational Practice and Research**

The opinions of 25 PSTs in this study show that implementing an IEPWriter project within an undergraduate special education course helped all PSTs better understand how to develop an IEP based on IDEA (2004) requirements and all the job responsibilities connected to IEP implementation. This finding highlights the importance of teacher preparation programs including as

many hands-on experiences as possible that PSTs will need to do once certified, including using online special education management systems and completing special education paperwork for a caseload of students. The students in this study had the opportunity to use IEPWriter for three weeks, which more than half (64%) felt this was an appropriate amount of time; however, most (72%) also found the system challenging to use. It is recommended that students have ample time and explicit directions on how to navigate online software before using it, connected with resources published by the online software, and have a protocol in place for how students can problem-solve difficulties as they arise as a class.

Future studies are needed to not only validate PSTs' experience or perception using an online system but to explore the short-term and long-term professional benefits, such as if teaching PSTs how to write an IEP using a special education online management platform versus Word documents increases the accuracy of IEP development. Additionally, longitudinal studies can see if special education management software can improve IEP development and maintenance for students once they are student teaching and again during their first year as full-time special education teachers, both of which are significant career transitions that require independent development of IEPs.

## Conclusion

There is a national shortage of special education teachers, with the paperwork requirements of the position being a top reason why many novice teachers exit the field (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). This concern requires an inquiry into how PSTs can be better trained to handle this essential job responsibility once certified and obtain full-time employment. Studies have explored improving IEP development in undergraduate courses by using case study students, providing additional professional development, and engaging in mock IEP meetings (Mason, 2023; Toledo, 2023; Werts et al., 2002). However, no studies to date have explored the benefits of PSTs learning how to use online software to develop and manage special education paperwork or balancing doing this for more than one student. This study begins to fill the gap by showing how adding an IEPWriter project within an undergraduate course helped all

PSTs (n=25) feel better prepared to develop and manage IEPs for a caseload of students. As this study elicits promising results, it is the first of many more that need to come to properly study the impact of how online special education management systems can help PSTs successfully transfer skills from the college classroom to their own K-12th grade classroom. PSTs require as much real-world learning experience and replication in the higher education setting to overcome potential job challenges and reduce the high attrition rates among special education teachers.

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